

470

STONE MEN OF MALEKULA

501

782

774

"When Masing¹ and his relatives bought this whaler, the elders of their clan consecrated it by sacrificing a valuable tusked boar, by which act the whaler assumed the rank of the sacrificed tusker. Now, the boar in question was a *na-humba*, and the vessel had thus been promoted to the rank of chief. Several months later, they consecrated, by means of sacrifices and other rites, its sail, its masts, its rudder, and finally its hold. In this way, the 'Queen'—that was the boat's name—had acquired the rank of high chief, and thenceforth no woman might go aboard, or even touch her. Masing and his whaler had now become one and the same person, and, when Masing died, the 'soul' of his whaler followed its master, in other words disappeared. It will not return to inhabit its timbers again till that day on which a fresh sacrifice is made similar to the first. Meanwhile, the vessel is dead, but, for all that, has not lost her consecrated character. And if, either through meanness, or fearing the considerable outlay necessary for repairs, no one decides to become Masing's successor, the 'Queen' will rot to pieces where she is, and her shelter will also collapse and die."²

"MORTUARY" RITES FOR A WRECKED SEA-GOING CANOE

501

766

So strong is the belief in the personal existence of a canoe that has thus been raised to high rank through sacrifice, that such craft are considered not only to live like human beings of high rank, but also, literally, to "die," and at their "death" they are accorded corresponding funerary rites.

Godefroy recounts how, during a storm, a whaler, named "Comet," after Halley's comet, which was brilliantly visible in the New Hebrides, was wrecked while an all-night dance was in progress in honour of the boat-shed they were erecting for it (they were all drunk). The "Comet" was driven on to the reef on the opposing mainland shore, and disappeared.

"On about the fifth day, when the sea had again become calm, the elders of the clan despatched several reliable men to conduct a search on the reef in order to establish the fact of the 'Comet's' 'death.' The seekers returned with the remains of the keel which they had found wedged between two coral rocks. The elders then held a debate, during the course of which they decided to begin forthwith the ceremonies proper to the death of a chief: the sounding of gongs and all-night dances lasting ten days; they began that very night.

"Nor was that all. On the thirtieth day of this mourning, men of

¹ Masing is not a title of high rank. Names are so frequently changed during the successive Maki rites that white men, not bothering themselves with native rites, frequently continue to call a man by the name he bore when they first knew him. This may be a case in point.

² Godefroy, I, 1932, p. 226.

CANOES

471

high [Maki] degree came carrying on their shoulders, from the dancing-ground of Pete-hul to the shore . . . a model canoe¹ . . . then in all the freshness of its funerary toilet. The whole thing, including the outrigger, was garlanded in perfect taste: truly, pious hands must have done this work. 501/766

"In the canoe's dug-out they had placed, on a bed of *roses de Chine*² and red and yellow crotons, a very curious object. It was a packet, something like one of the spindles used by our grandmothers when they pulled it clear of a full skein, swollen with linen or wool threads. I failed to discover what this packet was made of. All they would tell me was that it was 'like iron,' and that it was called *na-kor*.³ Anything that the *na-kor* touches becomes taboo to women. They told me that this object came to them from Raga, where it is in common use. In their language, *na-kor* means 'ancient custom.'

"As they placed this model canoe on the ground, I saw that they were leading, dragged by their feet, two large tusked boars, '*bouar*,'⁴ worth at least twelve English pounds apiece. At that moment, they launched the mortuary canoe, and at the same time loaded the two boars on a large canoe with three Pete-hul men aboard. They had calculated the right moment, when the tide flowing towards the opposite shore was at its strongest. The three men paddled their own canoe, but one of them from time to time gave a little shove to the model canoe in such a way that, together with its burden, it appeared to float of its own accord to the place of sacrifice. The reef on which the wreck occurred was a good 800 yards away; the voyage passed without incident.

"It was truly touching to see these aged men, this attentive audience, executing with obviously deep faith a rite which, in our eyes, has no real object, for it was a matter of no less weight, for them, than going to do honour, by means of extremely expensive sacrifices, to the chief's soul which the whale-boat had possessed during its lifetime!—a rite which had been handed down to them by means of tradition centuries old.

"Arrived at the spot where the '*Comet*' had foundered, they sacrificed the two tuskers; then, after forming into a kind of procession in single file,⁵ they paddled back. The two boars were carried up to Pete-hul dancing-ground, where they were cut up and their flesh divided among those chiefs who possessed the same rank as the 'dead' whale-boat."

¹ Such as is used in mortuary rites.

² I do not know to what kind of flower this refers.

³ This is evidently the same word as that which I record as *na-kur*, used for the type of magic employed in connexion with the correct placing of the outrigger booms. The expert who practises it is called *mara kur*. See p. 466; cf. also the word *kur-kur-rat*, used for the stones placed over an old man's grave.

⁴ I.e. of grade *bo-uars* (re-entrant-tusker). See p. 243.

⁵ This evidently refers to other canoes which had paddled out to witness the "obsequies."

473.

STONE MEN OF MALEKULA

501
766 The model canoe, "admirably constructed down to the smallest detail," was subsequently deposited and left to rot beneath a shelter on the shore at the spot where the path belonging to the Pete-hul clan comes down to the sea.¹

¹ Godefroy, 1, 1932, pp. 227-8. It would appear that such rites are only observed in cases of sudden death, i.e. wreck. He also says: "I have seen with my own eyes the end of 'Queen' and of 'Saint-Michel,' I have seen them die a quiet death. The first thing that happens is that their tabooed shelter collapses over them. During the time it takes for one to rot, her consecration is respected until the end. The idea would never enter anyone's mind that he should carry off any part of her fur, let us say, firewood. . . . It was heartrending, when, towards the end, 'Saint-Michel' had been the victim of an accidental fire, to watch her rails and half-burnt timbers sink in their last agony to the ground, and then swiftly become covered with plants and creepers. To-day, nothing but the site remains." (Godefroy, 1, 1932, p. 58.)